



# Assembling a ‘kind of’ home in the UK private renting sector

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on assemblage-thinking and specific assemblage concepts, this article explores the ways in which young, less affluent people create a sense of home in an unregulated, market-based private renting sector (PRS) that confers reduced tenant agency and frequent, undesired residential mobility. For this context, we propose the concept of ‘home-assembling’ to account for the ontologically, normatively and emotionally different processes involved in constructing a sense of home than those connoted by home-making.

Through in-depth telephone interviews and photo elicitation, we explore: the transient, incomplete nature of practices of home personalisation; the destabilising effect of broken things which erodes the sense of home and instils feelings of unworthiness; and processes of de-territorialisation, particularly unwanted real/feared re-location, space sharing and confinement in small rooms. We document that the struggle to continually assemble, de-assemble and re-assemble a sense of home drastically reduces private tenants’ wellbeing through stress, anxiety, depression and alienation. However, we also indicate potential lines of change towards alternative futures not least by the emergence of a tenants’ ‘collective body’ as well as by casting tenants’ housing ill-being as a matter of public concern.

## 1. Introduction

Every dwelling, owned or rented, is an aggregate of materials, money, emotions and practices while concomitantly serving as a roof over one’s head, a place of home, an investment vehicle, a store of wealth and a symbol of status (Bourdieu, 1989; Cook et al., 2013). The idea of assemblage is one way of understanding how these heterogeneous material, social and emotional components co-function as an emerging ‘whole’—e.g. ‘tenure’, ‘home’, ‘neighbourhood’—while also participating in other socio-spatial formations, such as the financial sector or the built ecology of the city. The notion of assemblage has been generally employed to understand emerging formations at the large scale of the global (Acuto and Curtis, 2014; Collier, 2006), the region (Allen and Cochrane, 2010) and the city (Jacobs, 2012; McCann, 2011; McFarlane, 2011b). We wish to engage it to the small scale of the home.

Clearly a home’s ‘boundaries’ do not coincide with the physical shell of one dwelling. Its multi-layered and multi-scalar nature have been documented in terms of *meanings* rather than home-making *practices* (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). It is indeed difficult to argue that the latter extend much beyond the local place of residence with the notable

exception of multiple homes across (trans)national residences (Brickell and Datta, 2011; Gorman-Murray and Bissell, 2018; Moskal, 2015; Soaita, 2015). As the concept of place-making well accounts for enmeshing oneself in the larger geographies of the neighbourhood, locality, region or cosmos (Heidegger, 1971), we wish to refocus the concept of home-making on the materialities of home for ‘there is no outer without inner space’ (Bryden, 2004, p.26) and no ‘home’ without the ‘house’, its contents and its immediate context. The neomaterialist stand of assemblage thought (DeLanda, 2015) encourages us to conceive home as the assemblage of *this* unique dwelling (in this local/national housing context) and *this* unique individual (in this household, social network).

We are moreover troubled by home’s displacement into the public and marginal spaces as experienced by homeless people and many migrants, refugees, domestic workers or car/caravan-dwellers because they are stripped of control over the use of their residential space or because the space is physically inappropriate or unaffordable (Lancione, 2018; Lloyd and Vasta, 2017; Tete, 2012). The new materialistic ontologies (Bennett, 2010; DeLanda, 2015), within which assemblage-thinking is situated, invite us to recall the materiality of home, its physical properties and individual uses, into a housing

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scholarship that has mostly remained centred on normative meanings and qualities (Clapham, 2011). Assemblage-thinking allows us to attend to ‘the small agency’ of things (Bennett, 2010, p.95) thereby expanding on and problematising exclusive views of home-objects as valued symbols of self (Marcus, 2006; Ratnam and Drozdowski, 2018; Rose, 2003).

We focus on the privately-rented home and ask how young, less affluent people construct a sense of home in the UK’s PRS. What factors act to (de)stabilise their sense of home?

We should note that societies differ in their renting arrangements (Kemeny, 1981). UK, as other Anglo-Saxon countries, offers unregulated, market-based PRSs with little legal/*de-facto* security of tenure, the landlord having unrestricted power to select tenants, set/increase rents or evict without giving a reason. This is in stark contrast with some Nordic and central European countries offering regulated, secure PRSs in which renters enjoy similar occupancy arrangements with homeowners (Hulse et al., 2011).<sup>1</sup> Our arguments therefore pertain exclusively to the former.

While this paper is not concerned with tenure changes in the UK, suffice to say that the size of the sector doubled in the last decade, reaching over 20 percent of all households (MHCLG, 2018a). Young peoples’ structural difficulties of accessing homeownership have been captured by the label ‘generation rent’ but this hides important socio-economic inequalities. Some young people are homebuyers, a few are landlords, and many live in the parental home. Labour markets and family support are key axes of differentiation, shaping the experience of buying and renting (Clapham et al., 2014; Hoolachan et al., 2017; McKee et al., 2017; Soaita et al., 2016). To problematise ‘generation rent’ discourses, we focus on less affluent young people for whom private renting is likely to be expensive, insecure, offering poor quality of, and limited agency over, the space of home. By documenting the transient, incomplete practices of home personalisation, the destabilising effect of broken things, unwanted real/feared relocation and space sharing/confinement we argue that in an unregulated, market-based PRS, ‘home-assembling’ is an ontologically, normatively and emotionally different relational process than the common understanding of home-making (Easthope, 2004).

The relevance of our paper is threefold. First, given the socio-cultural and economic ruptures taking place in the UK and other countries’ broken housing markets, revisiting the relational practices and materiality of home in a growing PRS is long overdue (Lloyd and Vasta, 2017). A critical discussion of the labour of (re)assembling a sense of home in the UK’s PRS poses important questions on the role of housing and whether policy-makers should privilege the asset or the home. While we refrain from entering these debates, we clearly put forward a case for housing as home. Second, assemblage-thinking helps decentre home from meanings towards practices, from human affect towards the small agency of things, from a relatively stable construct/norm towards more contingent, provisional and unsettling processes of dwelling. Proposing the concept of ‘home-assembling’ rather than home-making as better attending to the difficulties of constructing a sense of home in an unregulated PRS is our key assemblage-inspired contribution to

<sup>1</sup> There is a longstanding debate on the nature of different renting societies (e.g. Kemeny, 1981, Martin et al., 2018; Scanlon and Kochan, 2011). The simplest division cuts between regulated/secure and unregulated/insecure PRSs. However, this binary should be conceived as a continuum in order to account for the multiple regulatory aspects involved, e.g. lease length, end-of-lease provisions, rent levels/increases and tenant/landlord dispute arrangements. Country regulations are also not static with some moving towards deregulation (UK in the 1980s) or partial regulation (Ireland, Scotland in the 2010s). Overall, the Anglo-Saxon countries are clear examples of unregulated/insecure PRSs; Austria, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland of regulated/secure PRSs; Belgium, France, Finland, Spain fall in between. To note, UK’s regulations increasingly differ between jurisdictions with the English ones being the least and the Scottish somewhat more regulated.

critical home/housing studies. Third, by mobilising the idea of assemblage to the study of home rather than housing, we aim to contribute much needed ‘thick descriptions’ (Anderson et al., 2012) to the assemblage-informed research; our granular focus enables conceptual clarity and directs attention to the *failure* to emerge within an assemblage-scholarship almost exclusively focused on emergence and becoming.

The paper proceeds as follows. While there is no space to review the vast literature of home or different theoretical routes to assemblage-thinking, Section 2 discusses the ways in which DeLanda’s (2016) theorisation can contribute to a better understanding of practices of home-making or indeed home-assembling in a world conceived as contingent and in flux. After introducing the methodology (Section 3), three empirical sections follow. Section 4 examines the assembling of materialities of self, i.e. the attempt to personalise home through objects. Section 5 focuses on the agency of broken things and their capacity to destabilise the home. Section 6 analyses processes of home de-territorialisation through constrained use or extreme mobility; drawing on assemblage’s critical emphasis of imagining alternative futures, we also note that experiences of de-territorialisation form a base to demand regulatory change. Section 7 concludes by arguing that the struggle to continually assemble, de-assemble and re-assemble a sense of home within and across residential spaces governed by reduced control, and the everyday skirmish of claiming some of the dissipated assemblage’s agency drastically reduce tenants’ wellbeing through the experience of stress, anxiety, depression and alienation.

## 2. Home as assemblage

The currency of assemblage-thinking is stronger in urban and political studies where it has been applied at the large scale of the planetary/global, the region and the urban (Acuto and Curtis, 2014; Allen and Cochrane, 2010; Collier, 2006; Dittmer, 2014; McFarlane, 2011b). Nonetheless, assemblage-thinking has recently informed some housing analyses (Lovell and Smith, 2010) and ‘home’ studies, whether empirically grounded (Cook et al., 2013; Lancione, 2013; Rapoport, 2012; Ratnam and Drozdowski, 2018) or framing new directions for research (Gorman-Murray and Bissell, 2018; Steele and Vizel, 2014). Some others mobilised the device of assemblage in the archaeology of home (Normark, 2009; Yentsch, 2011) and domestic consumption (Woodward and Greasley, 2017). We believe assemblage-thinking is well suited to understand how tenants construct a sense of home in an unregulated market-based PRS. There are different theoretical routes for thinking about assemblage (see, e.g. related debate in Area, vol 43, issue 2), not least Latour’s ANT theory, Haraway’s cyborg vision or Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy. Offering an accessible reading of the last, we draw on DeLanda’s (2006, 2011, 2015) work for the choice of theory should both illuminate the nature of the object under study and recognise authors’ epistemological orientations. DeLanda interpreted the Deleuzian definition of assemblage as multiplicity by emphasising its two key aspects:

that the parts that are fitted together are not uniform either in nature or in origin, and that the assemblage activity links these parts together by establishing relations between them (DeLanda, 2016, p.2).

The idea of assemblage can be grasped through metaphors, such as (Buchanan and Lambert, 2005): the *archipelago* as the assemblage formed by different individual islands; the *grass* (as opposed to the trees) or a *wall* of un-cemented, heterogeneous stones. Several features of assemblages are relevant to our argument.

Assemblages are conceived as emerging ‘wholes’ characterised by relations of exteriority (between islands, blades of grass or stones). This means components retain their singularities, cannot be reduced to a single whole while simultaneously participating in other assemblages (e.g. nations and ecosystems). DeLanda’s favourite example is that of an

organisation; its employees and building are parts of the whole but they cannot be reduced to the organisation since people are concomitantly parts of other unrelated assemblages (family, community, professional networks) as the building contributes to the commercial infrastructure of a city. Housing is a particularly interconnected assemblage given that dwellings are parts of larger economic, welfare, regulatory/fiscal and spatial assemblages of production and consumption that shape practices of home, owner-occupied or rented. This is a well-rehearsed argument in housing studies (Cook et al., 2016), which only intensifies the recognised analytical and theoretical challenges of defining an assemblage's borders/scales.

The whole, and its broader context, shape the parts in such a way that not only their properties but their capacities become relevant. DeLanda exemplifies this by a knife having the material *property* of being sharp and the actual/virtual *capacities* of scratching, cutting or killing that which can be scratched, cut or killed by a knife. The concept of capacities or affordances was introduced to housing studies by Clapham (2011) as the possibilities that a dwelling offers to human use through its material properties and tenure rights. Regarding the privately-rented home, these capacities differ fundamentally between unregulated and regulated PRSs.

Importantly, the assemblage relationships of co-functioning are conceived as contingent rather than logically necessary. For our purpose this means that while aspirations, values and socioeconomics assemble into actual housing pathways (Clapham et al., 2014), the fact that *this* individual occupies *this* dwelling is to a high degree contingent on space/time availability, particularly in tight housing markets. The concept of 'individual singularity' (Normark, 2009, p.432) is key to rethink home as an assemblage of a material unit (this dwelling in this locality) and an embodied user (this individual in this household) *co-functioning in its social context* along three different axes: material/expressive; coding/decoding; and territorialising/de-territorialising.

Related to the first axis, assemblages consist of material and expressive components, exercising different sets of capacities. To exemplify, every house (material; capacity of protecting from the elements) has an architectural style (expression; capacity of signaling status/class) just as interior objects (memorabilia) have an expression (life history). A rich literature has documented the construction of home and the expression of self through the material expressivity of cherished objects, e.g. family photographs, a teapot or architectural features (Cieraad, 2006; Marcus, 2006; Rose, 2003; Sherman and Dacher, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2004).

The second axis of coding/decoding could be understood as discourse whether enshrined in law or internalised as norms, stereotypes, values, meanings and aspirations. For instance, in homeownership societies such as the UK, coding affects the experience of home though the normalisation of homeownership and stigmatisation of renting (Gurney, 1999a, 1999b). Likewise, the experience of home is affected by laws and various institutional/regulatory practices that privilege property ownership against the right to the home (Fox, 2007), hence lenders over homebuyers and landlords over tenants (Hulse et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2018). Consequently, in homeownership societies, middle-class meanings of home as heaven, hearth, a locale of privacy, comfort, control, identity and ontological security are coded into homeownership not renting. The construction of the 'good tenant' through technologies of governance is another way of coding the experience of the rented home (Dunn and Grabchuk, 2010; Flint, 2004; Leahy et al., 2018).

The third axis of (de)/(re)territorialisation looks at the fluid relationships between assemblage and its territory where territory 'is a space of intimate exchange' between the assemblage and the 'im-perceptible or perceptible forces' of its immediate surroundings, 'a space a life-sustaining regularities' (Lorraine, 2005, p.161) that is distinct from the chaotic space of cosmos (Buchanan and Lambert, 2005). The home assemblage can be territorialised/stabilised through habit, personalisation of space, performance of meaningful activities and

social engagement with our important others—as the home literature has well documented (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Cieraad, 2006; Lloyd and Vasta, 2017; Marcus, 2006). Conversely, domestic violence, lack of control, repossession, eviction, natural disasters can de-territorialise/destabilise the home (Boccagni, 2013; Brickell, 2012; Meth, 2003; Peterson, 2000; Tete, 2012; White, 2002).

The concepts of (de)/(re)territorialisation entail a spatial and a subjective dimension. Space however is defined by intensities rather than distances, such as intensity of belonging, identity or fear. Used interchangeably with (de)stabilisation, these concepts are conceived in relative and absolute terms (Buchanan and Lambert, 2005; DeLanda, 2006, 2016): an assemblage can destabilise as a matter of degree or change its 'state' just as water can be heated or cooled but only at a certain temperature will it change into steam or ice. Interestingly, Murray (2008) documented that even though domestic violence destabilises the sense of home, absolute de-territorialisation through relocation does not occur because of the labour of attachment/belonging that has already been invested. Indeed, DeLanda emphasises that processes of (de)/(re)territorialisation occur simultaneously. Certain thresholds should be reached for the home-assemblage—this house, this individual—to abruptly de-territorialise as in the case of sudden, undesired residential mobility caused by divorce/separation, war or eviction. While tenants move for various reasons, it is telling that one-third of all privately-renting households in England relocated within the first year of residency and another third between one and three years (GOV.UK, 2015).

From this concise discussion, one can observe that in the unregulated, marked-based PRSs of Anglo-Saxon countries, the privately-rented home affords reduced capacities than the owner-occupied one along the three axes discussed above. For instance, regulatory and subjective coding gives landlords' power over tenants, undermining home-making through lack of control over the residential space and certainly de-territorialises it through frequent, undesired relocations. Hence, we propose the concept of 'home-assembling' to argue that constructing a sense of home in an unregulated, market-based PRS involves an ontologically, normatively and emotionally different relational process than home-making (Cieraad, 2006; Easthope, 2004, 2014).

Since no component in the assemblage is ontologically privileged, human or non-human, assemblages are ontologically flat. This is particularly relevant to critical studies because it opens up alternative futures by emphasising becoming/transforming/emerging rather than being (Dittmer, 2014). We welcome this flat ontology because it gives users an equal status to the various structures/mechanisms involved in the production/consumption of housing. However, flat ontology leads to a view that agency is distributed across or co-constituted by components. On the one hand, this view is energising because it attends to the 'small agency' of things (Bennett, 2010, p.95), which have 'sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events' (idem, p.vii) even though their 'agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces' (idem, p.21). Therefore, the analytical attention needs to go beyond objects as passive symbols of self to hearing 'how things call at us' (Woodward and Greasley, 2017, p.661); and things call louder when they break down (Bennett, 2010; Graham and Thrift, 2007; Kaika, 2004).

On the other hand, the distributed agency of a flat ontology may seem less helpful to theorise power and power's distribution across humans, institutions (e.g. tenants, landlords, state) and things (Bennett, 2010). Consequently, some authors have chosen to combine assemblage theory with the Bourdieusian concept of field (Lovell and Smith, 2010) or complexity theory (Dittmer, 2014). Others have opted to use assemblage as a descriptor, a methodological ethos or a way of thinking rather than a fully-fledged theory (Anderson et al., 2012). McFarlane (2009, 2011a) is perhaps most at wont to demonstrate the assemblage contribution to critical thought by reminding the inevitability of the

present and imagining alternative futures. Dittmer's (2014, p.394) borrowed concept of 'bodies politic' is helpful in capturing emerging calls for systemic change grounded in subjective identities assembled into a 'collective body'. For this, the assemblage concept of the 'space of possibilities' is particularly relevant; it contains 'virtual entities' which are 'as real as the actual ones' (DeLanda, 2012, p.15). Such virtual realities are nonetheless not unlimited but defined by certain parameters, properties and states, such as water which can only be solid, liquid or gas—we will return to this idea in Section 6. The debate on the relationship between assemblage, power, causality and responsibility is, however, far from being concluded (e.g. Acuto and Curtis, 2014; Bennett, 2010). Subscribing to assemblage as a way of thinking, we aim to unravel the ways in which the unequally-distributed power within the home-assemblage affects its (de)territorialisation and the capacities of things.

To reiterate, assemblage-thinking enables us to conceptualise home in a simple and novel way as the emerging whole between *this* unique individual (in this household, social network) and *this* unique house (in this local/national housing context). The individual-house assemblage co-functions along the three intersecting axes of material/expressive, coding/decoding, and territorialisation/de-territorialisation. These axes are however inseparable for it is through coding and the expression of things that processes of (de)territorialisation unravel. Assemblage theorists (DeLanda, 2016; Dittmer, 2014; McFarlane, 2011a) have argued (de)/(re)territorialisation processes need in-depth examination for they unravel the flux of power within assemblage and direct attention to new spaces of possibility. Given the constrained use and high residential mobility within the UK's PRS, the axis of (de)/(re)territorialisation is best suited to present our findings along three empirical sections. Before that, the next section presents the research design of our exploratory study.

### 3. Methodology

Sixteen semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted in February/March 2018 with private tenants aged 18–35; living in England and Scotland; having an household income below the national average of £27,500; and not being in full-time education. Through these criteria we aimed to explore the renting experiences of low-to-middle income young people who entered the labour market. Participants were also invited to provide pictures of their home as a base for discussion, a method called photo elicitation (Rose, 2012); pictures' content was decided by participants.

Participation was sourced via social media (project Twitter and Facebook;  $n = 4$ ) and public online platforms (Shelter, Generation Rent, ACORN<sup>2</sup>;  $n = 12$ ) which displayed our printed/digital flyer. Overall, 61 prospective participants contacted us, of whom 48 were eligible. Given our funding limit of 16 interviews, we tried to 'balance' across geography, gender and household type and privilege lower income households. We recruited 10 participants from England and six from Scotland (see Table 1). All participants gave informed consent and will be referred to by pseudonyms.

For most participants, the PRS was very expensive. Only four paid 'affordable' rents of below 30 percent of household income; for six, rents were extremely 'unaffordable' taking between 50 and 90 percent of their income. While this article will not focus on affordability, the nexus between high rents and low/insecure wages has clearly framed participants' home experiences, primarily in terms of afforded housing quality and capacity to personalise the space. Remarkably, all but two participants had a university degree; all but four were employed professionals (including teacher, government officer, retail manager, librarian, nurse); and only two were in receipt of housing benefits/

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics

Characteristics	No of participants
Age	21–25 years 7
	26–30 years 6
	31–35 years 3
Gender	Female 9
	Male 6
	Other 1
Household type	Single 13
	Couple 1
	Families with children 2
Ethnicity	White British 8
	White Scottish/Irish 4
	White Other 2
	Black, Asian Minority Ethnic 2
Illness or Disability	Yes 4
	No 12
Employment status	Employed 12
	'0-hour' or self-employed 4
Declared household income	Closer-to-middle (£21,000–£27,000) 8
	Lower (£3600–£19,000) 8
Subjective financial situation	Comfortable 1
	Doing alright 6
	Just about getting by 5
	Finding it difficult 3
	Finding it very difficult 1
Sharing arrangements	Sharing with friends 6
	Sharing with strangers 4
	Not sharing 6 (of which two families with children)
Education levels	A/GCSE level 2
	Degree 6
	Master 7
	PhD 1

allowance (one couple and one family of four). Unaffordable rents in this context highlight in-work poverty notwithstanding educational qualifications and professional employment.

Whilst this study is small, the collected data is particularly rich. All participants provided in total 101 pictures (except one who provided a video), showing a mix of interior and exterior features, personal and communal spaces. The photos provided useful prompts during the interviews but more importantly, they directed our attention to the labour of home-assembling, inductively inspiring our way of thinking, prompting immersion in the assemblage literature, and an interactively inductive/deductive coding approach. The interview explored four areas: the experience of living in the PRS, on which we focus in this paper; housing aspirations; the broader impact of housing; and the recent tenancy changes in Scotland.

Interviews lasted on average one hour; were professionally transcribed; the anonymised transcripts were imported into an NVivo database for analysis. As recommended by assemblage-theorists, our approach to interviewing and thematic analysis adopted 'an ethnographic sensibility' (Baker and McGuirk, 2017, p.425) by probing/observing the unfamiliar and practices of doing and 'an attentiveness to things' (Bennett, 2010, p.xiv), with codes/themes attending to practices/(doing), materiality/(being) and discourse/(saying). Given our small, exploratory sample, we refrain from quantifying and rarely report the number of participants who substantiated a certain theme though we always qualify observations by relevant characteristics, e.g. household income/type or forms of sharing (Table 1 showing the number of participants in each subgroup).

Before presenting findings in the following three sections, we confess that—seeing our publicly-displayed digital flyer—Melissa (51, England, not eligible) emailed to contest our age focus:

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.shelter.org.uk/>; <http://www.generationrent.org/>; <https://acorntheunion.org.uk/>



What I'd like to know is why this study is limited by age? Do these researchers really believe that generation rent stops effecting people over the age of 36? Unfortunately this is far from the truth.

We agree. In 2017, 44 percent of all privately-renting households in England were headed by 16–34 year-olds and 48 percent by 35–64 year-olds (MHCLG, 2018b). While our small study aimed to challenge the discourse of 'generation rent' by focusing on the experiences of less affluent young renters, this challenge needs to be taken further by documenting the experiences of people aged over 35.

#### 4. Assembling materialities of self

it's about your house being your home and showing what we're like, how our house looks, what we're interested in (Amy, 29, Nottingham).

Amy asserted above the persistent coding of home as 'who we are'. Inscripting our self-identities into the materiality of home can be seen as one way of home-territorialisation. Territorialisation refers to 'the degree to which the components of the assemblage have been subjected to a process of homogenisation, and the extent to which its defining boundaries have been delineated and made impermeable' (DeLanda, 2016, p.3). As the literature of home has well documented, one way of identity-coding concerns symbolic possessions engaged in home-making (Marcus, 2006). In our study, photo elicitation was particularly useful in evidencing the indeterminacy, fragility and contingency of *assembling* a sense of self in the PRS, and indeed inspired us to propose the concept of home-assembling:

That bookcase in the first photo is just a wooden pallet that I painted into a bookcase because there's no point buying furniture when I have to move all the time... [Interviewer: *And the little house nearby?*]. That is mine as well. I bought it off Gumtree about a year ago, so I moved that from my old flat. My chest of drawers as well, I just found on the street about a year ago and painted it. But because I didn't pay any money for it, if I couldn't move it somewhere, I'd just give it up... Because I'm so used to moving around, I put a lot of posters up straightaway and things feel like home quite quickly just because I put all my posters up (Evelyn, 23, Edinburgh).

Evelyn succeeded in assembling a sense of home and self through the vibrancy of things she appropriated from local 'throwaway' and digital economies. To paraphrase Woodward and Greasley (2017), things 'smile back' at her with their tamed expressions and the personal collections they hold (books, clothes, her childhood parrot, Jabber, a teddy-bear, photos). Self-made colourful flags decorate her bedroom's and the shared kitchen's walls "just to make it feel like home, just to personalise the space, make it feel like it's ours". It is, however, obvious that home-assembling sustains only *temporary* affection since stuff may be given up or left behind when relocating. The materiality of this assembled décor 'smiles back' with an expression of transiency. Moreover, the labour of assembling meaningful objects that territorialises the home is in tension with many parallel processes of de-territorialisation—which we will discuss later.

Other lower-income participants laboured to create a sense of home through local 'throwaway' economies, literally assembling stuff into furniture or art composition, or just by rearranging the furnishing layout. Perhaps no one expressed a stronger sense of self-identity than Clara (25, Sheffield). With her partner, she adorned the public space of their front door and the social space of their living-room with vibrant queer/feminist (some self-made) posters and banners, rich in cultural significance (that book, that film, that pub) or reminding them of demonstrations in which they took part. Only two participants refrained from engaging in home-assembling:

Because I feel so unsure about how long I'll be in this flat, it feels like I don't want to make a commitment to, sort of, homemaking because

I might have to move again next year... it feels, sort of, temporary. It's hard to shake this feeling (George, 27, London).

Three closer-to-middle income participants were however able to express their self through renting into desired architectural style and interior décor.<sup>3</sup> Two were even offered agency in the choice of redecoration by choosing furniture, curtains, beds, wall colour or kitchen units that the landlord wanted to replace. This augmented tenant agency affords countless psychosocial benefits, such as wellbeing, sociability, social status or a symbolic celebration of finally feeling settled (Hoolachan et al., 2017):

I was celebrating the fact that I'd actually stayed in the same job and the same flat for about a year. And it had been the longest that I'd stayed in a place since I was a student. And so I thought that it was time to commemorate that by doing some decorating... Tested myself with a bit of painting, something that I wanted to do for me really (Donna, 30, Edinburgh).

Commenting on the pictures they sent, these participants expressed a sense of being 'house-proud', reminding us that urban, architectural and interior design are socially coded (Bourdieu, 1989; DeLanda, 2015). However, it was not necessarily the 'market' that allowed them to enjoy their stylish lets and more agency but rather their own/parental social networks of friends, preferring to charge less to trusted individuals. While all but one participant were satisfied with the capacities of their home's location (e.g. amenities, accessibility to job and friends), location was a social and cultural symbol for the eight closer-to-middle income participants:

I choose to live in a city centre because of socialising, things to do, nicer properties, more historic properties. I like living in an older tenement (Toby, 25, Edinburgh).

Exceptionally, Salena, one of our least affluent participants, also reported a sense of cultural/ethnic identity with the neighborhood:

I'm Asian and it's really important to me that I live in an area with lots of other Asian people, because I have access to my food, and food is the most important thing, I can't get the ingredients I want anywhere else, so that's why I live here (Salena, 21, Bristol).

Food is an important materiality of self and a home-making/assembling practice through its sensual qualities (colour, scent, texture), performance of meaningful activities (cooking, socialising) and cultural assertion. All these aspects were substantiated through our participants' photographs and talk (12 participants sent pictures of their kitchen). Bennett (2010) further emphasised the vibrant capacity of food and scent to make one, for instance, happy or depressed, energetic or lethargic, at home or alienated from home. While this was not our interview focus, participants made scant reference, e.g. by referring to the 'homely smell of baking a banana cake' (Toby, 25, Edinburgh), 'the pleasure of cooking from scratch' (Donna, 30, Edinburgh) or the intrusion of others' 'cooking stench' in a shared house (Samuel, 28, Bristol). While these references talk about socio-cultural practices, they also assert the affordances of things such as cookers, space or fans; we will develop this point in the next section.

Section 2 showed that assemblage theory was questioned for arguing that agency (and power) is dissipated within an assemblage, though theorists were wont of stressing its asymmetric flow. While Sections 5 and 6 will reflect on the implications of landlords' dominant power over tenants, we observed the 'small agency' of tenants by means of non-authorised practices of solidarity (e.g. six participants either housed homeless friends or were housed when homeless) and companionship of pets. We focus on the latter. PRS is not a pet-friendly sector

<sup>3</sup> In assemblage theory, this is discussed as renting a 'homely Starbucks' fake rather than a McDonalds which is honest about its de-territorialisation (Buchanan and Lambert, 2005).

(Power, 2017), yet four participants had pets, with or without authorisation; two cats featured in pictures, showing their witty agency. However the skirmish of seeking authorisation or hiding pets across successive tenancies diminished tenants' wellbeing:

For ages, I'd wanted a pet, I've grown up with pets around me. And you don't really feel you can have one, because if you're gonna be on the move all the time, or is your landlord gonna say yes. And then even if you do kind of have one, when you need to move, do you know if the next place will accept a pet? (Samuel, 28, Bristol).

My cats are really important for my health, they keep me happy, and so it's really important for me to live somewhere where I can keep pets. But the landlord doesn't know I have cats here, so we just hide them whenever he comes (Salena, 21, Bristol).

While tenants strive or indeed struggle to assemble a sense of home in their rented place—territorialising thus the home-assemblage—parallel processes destabilise it. We will turn to these in the following two sections.

## 5. The agency of broken things

Through material or symbolic expressions, things create homeliness that is a meaningful, satisfying co-functioning between *this* individual and *this* house. Or un-homeliness, when things resist human agency, destabilising the home-assemblage:

The hallway is brightly lit and I like the old wooden floors and the tenement features, but the floorboards aren't properly nailed and it's hard to keep it clean. The front door is welcoming, although the lock is wobbly and I'm always worried that it'd be easy for someone to break in. I love our gas stove but the landlord didn't put an extractor fan and the window is hard to reach to get open so the kitchen is always smoky. All of this encapsulates how I feel about renting—it does the job but I wish I could have somewhere that I can fix and do up without having to get someone's permission (Briana, 26, Edinburgh).

Rereading the above in the spirit of vibrant materialism (Bennett, 2010), it is not so much about the human unable to clean but the floor resisting cleaning through its own properties, refusing Briana's gratification. Things age and break. The agency of broken things contributes to home destabilisation, generating ambiguity and discomfort. While it is unlikely that the reduced capacities of such ordinary things as mentioned above would be ever coded in regulatory acts and more likely be left to the 'market', co-functioning with broken things may lead to the abrupt de-territorialisation of the home-assemblage through relocation. Disrepair is one of the top five reasons for tenants to relocate, causing about 15 percent of moves in the UK (Eberlin, 2018). However, relocating is particularly disruptive for low-income families with children, for whom co-functioning with aged, broken and outdated things may be the only choice. Everyday frustration generates ill-being and even a sense of physical insecurity:

I sent five pictures with the bathroom, I wanted you to see how old-fashioned is. Half the ceiling is coming off, the grouting in-between is old, you can't really clean it. There is no shower. We use an attached shower because it's just nice to have a shower in the 21st century... It's just really old, and it hasn't been redecorated for ages. The lino has ingrained dirt... And round the toilet, there's always a smell, you just have to clean every other day, because you get a urinal smell from it. I did ask the landlord if we could have new lino, recently and he actually send someone to have a look and give him a quote, but we haven't heard back. Unlikely... I feel stressed, frustrated, anxious, angry, we get angry quite a lot whenever I stop to think about those repair, things and stuff (Nadia, 35, Holbeach).

It's a big house that makes a lot of noise... sometimes it does sound like there's someone trying to come in the house, but there never is, fingers crossed there never is, anyway, so for the most part I do feel safe and secure in the house (Nick, 25, Brighton).

All our participants gave in-depth accounts of their living with broken furniture and faulty appliances; defective water, gas or electric installations; broken boilers and white goods; mice and wasp infestation; cold, damp and draft; shabby doors and rotten/duct-taped windows, past or present. They highlighted health and safety concerns and told us how these make them feel, resembling experiences of inhabiting the 'uninhabitable' (Simone, 2016). The home diminishes to being just a shelter: "my house just needs to be a place to live in, and to sleep, so I don't really have any high expectations from my house" (Salena, 21, Bristol).

In 2016, England, 38 percent of private renters lived in poor housing (compared to 24 percent of owner-occupiers MHCLG, 2018b). However, the policy tropes 'maintenance-and-repair' or 'wear-and-tear' are unable to translate the strange experience of a world 'out-of-order' or 'out-of-date', as also substantiated by Kaika (2004) for affluent homes or Graham and Thirft (2007) for the city. In the case of the privately-rented home, however, we argue that the interpretation of poor maintenance reaches an altogether different scale; it is a daily reminder of landlords' power over tenants and the symbolic violence of being ignored, rendered unworthy or non-existent:

...so the landlord is sort of scatty. If we ask him to do something it normally takes a long time for him to actually do it...whereas other landlords or letting agents I've had, it might take them a long time because they're actively avoiding doing it but that's not the case for this guy. I think he just forgets (Evelyn, 23, Edinburgh).

While co-functioning with broken things destabilise the home-assemblage through denied capabilities, additional chores and feelings of frustration, other processes de-territorialise it, weakening or breaking the link between *this* individual and *this* house.

## 6. De-territorialisation and the 'space of possibilities'

That's always the slight worry when you're renting that one day they might turn around and "Go, I've decided to sell. You've got a month. Get out" (Ella, 22, Newcastle).

You don't even get fully invested to get all your stuff out. You'll still be kind of living in suitcases or boxes (Donna, 30, Edinburgh).

DeLanda (2006, p.258) states that de-territorialising processes 'include any factor which decreases density, promotes geographical dispersion, or eliminates some of the rituals which, like churchgoing, are key to the maintenance of traditional solidarity'. This can be easily translated to the assemblage of home where insecurity of tenure eliminates home-making rituals, determining many tenants to refrain from personalising their homes, or to do so exclusively within the 'throw-away' economy (as in Section 4). Of living, literally or metaphorically, in 'suitcases or boxes' all participants bar one referred to.<sup>4</sup> All participants depicted insecurity of tenure as a distressing ontological condition. For four, it affected their health:

When I was told to leave, I felt really sad. I became depressed for two months. It was really hard to transition away from that place because it was the first safe house I'd ever lived in. And I really made a home for myself. For the first time in my life, I was like, putting pictures on the walls, decorating it, and buying plants. And I had my

<sup>4</sup> Emily (21, Englefield) enjoyed the freedom of renting. However, it is telling that she planned to return to her parental home to reduce housing costs and save for a deposit.

cats. Then I had to leave, and I feel like I don't have a home again (Salena, 21, Bristol).

Both me and my partner have chronic mental health issues, and we're both receiving treatment for our health problems, and I think living in a flat where you're named tenants and there's some level of stability because there's a contract is generally good for mental health... but even though I feel settled now, it's really not my decision if I stay there. It's whether or not my landlord wants to continue renting to me, basically. So yes, it's quite a depressing situation (Clara, 25, Sheffield).

It is disheartening how insecure the 'security' described above feels. This insecurity is not necessarily about transient living but about proprietors' power over tenants, coded into legislative and regulatory frameworks. The absurdity of governing unfurnished lets under 6-months assured tenancies was emphasised by Amy (29, Nottingham), our only participant in this situation. DeLanda argues that de- and re-territorialisation occur concomitantly; once evicted, one must find a new tenancy. However, relocating at short notice is daunting. All participants indicated anxiety of moving in tight markets or passing judgmental interviews with letting agents or house-sharers:

It's really competitive and you've basically got to sign up when you're in the flat. It just feels a bit like you have to commit really quickly without having the time to think about (Donna, 30, Edinburgh).

You have to go through this process all the time, of being interviewed by people. And if you aren't exactly what someone's looking for, then it becomes quite a tiring process. And you sort of internalise that feeling, that maybe there's something wrong with you (Samuel, 28, Bristol).

Contrary to housing economists' claims (O'Sullivan and Gibb, 2003), changing tenancies is expensive if weighted to frequency and income. The financing of searching time, of overlaps between tenancies, deposits, utility contracts and Council tax or of a roof between exit/entry dates—and in England daunting letting agents' fees, banned by Scottish legislation since 2012—was a distressing thought for our participants. The complexities of relocating remind us of the much larger housing assemblages to which 'home' is concomitantly part, such as supply industries (Cook et al., 2016; Lovell and Smith, 2010). Having been served a 'no fault' eviction for having a child (in a big enough house) and now planning another, Amy (29, Nottingham) feared:

We might end up spending, I don't know, even thousands of pounds to move, and then it would be just the whim of the landlord to tell us, sort of six months down the line "Well I'm selling, so here's a notice". And then you will have to move again.

Relocating breaks down the home-assemblage since we conceived it as the emerging whole between *this* individual and *this* house. The worry of relocating destabilises it. It is useful to make here a clear distinction between (de)territorialisation and (de)stabilisation as they are unhelpfully used interchangeably in the assemblage literature (Buchanan and Lambert, 2005). Section 2 showed that (de)territorialisation entails both a spatial and subjective dimension, the two primarily seen as intertwined. But home-assemblages may erode their subjective dimension while still remaining spatially territorialised, e.g. when the sense of home is eroded through the agency of broken things or constrained personalisation without reaching the threshold for relocation. Reserving the term destabilisation for processes that erode an assemblage without spatially disrupting it brings conceptual clarity and we hope, is an original contribution we make to the assemblage scholarship. Conversely, the degree to which re-territorialisation through desired relocation may entail (or not) experiences of destabilisation is a matter for future research.

However, other factors than those discussed so far destabilise the

home-assemblage by diminishing its capacities or expressions, such as confinement in small rooms, sharing with strangers or lacking space to socialise, hence de-territorialising some home-activities. We discuss these next by focusing on shared accommodation.

### 6.1. Sharing space

The average dwelling size in the UK, of about 80 m<sup>2</sup>, is smaller than in every other western EU country (Soaita and Dewilde, 2019). Additionally, overcrowding rates in the PRS are four times higher than in owner-occupation.<sup>5</sup> Of our participants, six were not sharing (three singles, three couples/families). Of the 10 participants who shared, six shared with a friend a two-bedroom home (one being a lodger). These participants were satisfied with the space, which afforded 'enough' privacy (own bedroom, sometimes own bathroom) and socialising (shared living room and kitchen). The Bedroom Standard casts this occupancy as the *minimal* standard.

However, four participants shared in housing in multiple occupation (HMO), of which one provided a dedicated living room but three did not. These were 3-bed houses occupied by four unrelated adults (one by six). By the Bedroom Standard, they were overcrowded primarily because "most private rented properties don't have living rooms, because landlords know they can make more money by turning it into a bedroom" (Evelyn, 23, Edinburgh). Confinement to one's bedroom, however, incapacitates an able body, as Evelyn confessed:

I just missed your call because I fell asleep. Because I'm in my bed a lot, just reading or on the laptop, I just fall asleep a lot because I'm in my bed anyway... Whereas if I was on a sofa, that wouldn't happen. For example not having a living room is quite frustrating also when I want to have people over.

Even in the Scottish registered HMOs, small kitchens can pass as 'enough' living space for four adults having the right to sociability:

We kind of used the kitchen but it wasn't really like a relaxing space. We never had a TV or anything like that. We didn't have friends over so much and instead we went out. But it's a bit strange because most people in the family home have a living room so to not have one in your rented accommodation is a bit odd.... you forget how important it is until you don't have one (Briana, 26, Edinburgh)

Overcrowding partially de-territorialises the home since socialising activities move into the public space of bars, gyms, parks or streets. But the intrusion of strangers in the inner space of home also diminishes its key quality of privacy. Strangers belong to the outer space of home (Lloyd and Vasta, 2017), hence sharing with friends is cast as comfortable while sharing with strangers in transient homes is unsettling:

I would say every couple of months a different person moved in to one of the rooms. So I didn't really feel like I knew them. By the end, somebody moved in and I didn't even know that they were moving in. It was just... it was a bit strange (Donna, 30, Edinburgh).

Having unannounced strangers 'walking around your house and inspecting door frames and things, makes you feel like you can't really relax... almost, like, you're going to get punished' (Evelyn, 23, Edinburgh). However, unannounced landlord's inspections, illegal in England and Scotland, were particularly resented by Salena (21, Bristol) who needs a female-only environment required to support her cultural and gender identity:

He will turn up at the house, without giving any notice, he'll try to get inside... He doesn't even know who lives there and who doesn't. He always forgets that I live here. He asked me for my rent, even though I'd paid it... he turns up at the house without giving notice,

<sup>5</sup> 8.7% versus 2.3%, respectively, all households in each tenure.

and it makes me really uncomfortable, because he's a man.

Finally, three participants were lodgers. Two lodged with friends, which draws attention to deep inequalities between young people, with some being landlords (Soaita et al., 2016). While one participant was delighted with the arrangement, the others were more ambiguous, pleased financially but not fully comfortable:

There's always a sense of not being as comfortable when you're living in the presence of a landlady or landlord, because it's kind of authoritative guardian type person. Also you don't want to annoy them or give them any reason to be annoyed at how you're living (Nick, 25, Brighton).

Overall, despite participants' efforts to make a home in the PRS by territorialising it in their current place and exercising some degree of agency, more powerful processes destabilise or de-territorialise the home-assemblage, with re-territorialisation becoming increasingly tedious over frequent moves. These processes cast the privately-rented home-assemblage into a 'kind of' home at best or just a place that 'does the job':

I have a roof over my head, the heating works, the hot water... But when it comes to sort of being house-proud, inviting friends over and having dinner, and making plans about redecorating, none of that is possible (Nadia, 35, Holbeach).

Mohan (35, Reading), our least affluent participant, concludes:

Because I'm getting stress and anxiety because of the attitudes of the landlords, I wouldn't call it a home. Because when you step in your home, you will have a sigh of relief. So, you have this long breath coming outside of your belly, and you just say, I'm home, eventually.

## 6.2. The 'space of possibility'

The current state of debate on the key question of conceptualisation of power by assemblage-theorists points to the lines of flight, that is possible trajectories and forces of change or mutation to different states of being (Acuto and Curtis, 2014; Lancione, 2013). DeLanda (2011, 2015) exemplifies the concept of state by the example of water, which can be liquid, solid or steam, each having different properties and capacities. Housing scholars (Easthope 2014), but also our participants, are well aware that the state of the PRS is ontologically different across countries. The UK and other Anglophone countries feature liberal assemblages; the privately-rented home is metaphorically liquid with high residential/tenure mobility, hence high insecurity and low prospects for territorialisation. Conversely, Scandinavian and west-central European countries feature more regulated assemblages; the privately-rented home is metaphorically solid with lower residential/tenure mobility, hence higher security and prospects for territorialisation (e.g. Hulse et al., 2011).

Interestingly, it was Germany that sparked the progressive imagination of all our participants as offering the ideal PRS arrangements. We observed the formation of a 'collective body' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987). Our recruitment strategies approached online platforms of tenants' organisations active in politicising the asymmetric power relations and agentic capabilities between landlords, tenants and things. Conversations taking place in ACORN websites (requires membership application) mobilised tenants in street protests and collective petitions for better renting rights. Such organisational assemblages are emerging into a 'bodies politic' (Dittmer, 2014, p.394) centered on the right to the home. Our participants, English and Scottish, appreciated the new Scottish Private Tenancy Law as 'a step in the right direction' but, as we have discussed, more changes are needed to make a private tenancy home:

[We need] some culture change about how we think about homes. They're supplying homes to people. It's not just a financial product

for them. It's our home (Evelyn, 23, Edinburgh).

There's a lot of growing interest in the housing issues and the private rented sector through tenants' unions and organisations that are springing up around the country to give power to renters. I think that provides a space for potential change, because ultimately there's so many of us in this country and the United Kingdom that are renters (Nick, 25, Brighton).

We will unashamedly express our allegiances with participants' struggle to assemble their home today and create a space for more meaningful home-making practices in the PRS as in any tenure and disregarding income. We found Salena's (21, Bristol) comment below deeply disheartening:

The big thing I realise, actually, I think you need to be very rich in the first place to be able to rent in a way that's good for you.

## 7. Conclusions

We aimed at shedding light on how young, less affluent people construct a sense of home in the UK's PRS and explored factors that may (de)stabilise it. Drawing on DeLanda's (2016) assemblage theory, we defined the privately-rented home as the assemblage between *this* unique individual (in this household, social network) and *this* unique house (in this neighborhood, housing context). Assemblage-thinking and awareness of vibrant materialism allowed us to see the 'house' in the 'home' for the house and its material content frame the experience of dwelling; unlike meanings, practices cannot be separated from the materiality of things and the spatiality of territory.

Aware of the three interactive axes along which the assemblage parts co-function, we focused empirically on understanding factors that (de)stabilise or (de)/(re)territorialise private tenants' sense of home, and their implications to wellbeing. The material and expressive components of the house were crucial to the capacity/incapacity to construct a home. Participants laboured to create a sense of home by assembling materialities of self. Yet practices of space personalisation remained transient and unsatisfactory in the case of lower-income households or indeed non-personal in the case of 'already-made' homely lets of those with higher financial/social capital. Nonetheless, the small agency of tenants interacted with the small agency of things, with DIY possessions 'smiling back' to humans in the here and now of home-assembling. Tenants have also successfully appropriated some of the dissipated agency of the assemblage, e.g. by non-authorised companionship of pets that made them feel more at home.

Opposing this labour of taming the materiality of a privately-rented house, we recognised processes of home destabilisation through our novel focus on the *agency* of broken things, uniquely enabled by assemblage-thinking. We documented that the loud, irritating call of broken things and their resistance to co-functioning far exceeds ideas of maintenance-and-repair, describing a world out-of-order. They are a continual reminder of tenants' asymmetric agency. The skirmish of requiring repairs, open refusal or simply ignoring render tenants as unworthy. We showed that the material/expressive influence of broken things goes much beyond usual health-and-safety concerns to what is required to maintain/create a homely space. Home destabilisation through disrepair may lead to decisions to relocate, hence de-territorialisation.

The axis of (de)/(re)territorialisation was decisive to the ability to create a sense of home. With other scholars (Hoolachan et al., 2017; Hulse et al. 2011), we noted the particularly negative implications of tenure insecurity to the everyday experience of home. Generating reticence against personalising home's space, daily worries and anxiety, and indeed disruption, depression and high expenses when it occurs at the agency of others, tenure insecurity destabilises or breaks down the home-assemblage. Re-territorialisation obviously occurs—though four



participants experienced homelessness in between—but the sense of home erodes over successive moves.

We have therefore proposed the assemblage-inspired and empirically-supported concept of *home-assembling* that refers to ontologically, normatively and emotionally different relational processes of constructing a sense of home than those connoted by home-making (Cieraad, 2006; Easthope, 2004). The latter pertains to situations of higher stability and afforded agency than assumed in the former, which occurs in an unregulated, market-based PRS, such as in the UK. We believe the concept of home-assembling is an important contribution to home/housing studies, which have mainly focused on stable meanings and social norms framing the owner-occupied home; it expands on related concepts such as unhoming (Baxter and Brickell, 2014) by looking at contexts where the home fails fully to emerge—hence it cannot be unmade.

The privately-rented home-assemblage may just do the job of shelter or constitute a ‘kind of’ home, however, it has increasingly instituted a ‘bodies politic’ that challenges the status quo and calls for a different state of the future. This relates directly to the most powerful axis of coding/decoding the home-assemblage through legal regulations. It was argued that assemblage theory is well positioned to contribute critical tools for casting ‘matters of concerns’ (McFarlane, 2011a, p.213). Home is such a tool that can mobilise ‘politics of affects’ (Anderson, 2014) in questioning what housing is for and what regulatory codes are required to create a home in a privately-rented dwelling. Another consists of our ‘thick descriptions’ documenting the struggle to continually assemble, de-assemble and re-assemble a sense of home within and across residential spaces governed by reduced control, and the everyday skirmish of claiming some of the dissipated assemblage’s agency. These processes drastically reduce tenants’ well-being through stress, anxiety, depression and alienation hence, they should be positioned as matters of public concern. Documenting the emerging ‘bodies politic’ (Dittmer, 2014) as a line of flight towards alternative PRS futures and making the continued case for housing as home are key recommendations for future research; here assemblage-thinking can much contribute.

Besides contributing the concept of home-assembling to home/housing studies, our small research is significant to the broader assemblage literature through our call for theoretical clarity of the concepts of (de)territorialisation and (de)stabilisation, which need not simply be used interchangeably: the former should *necessarily* denote a territorial alteration of the assemblage and the latter one of intensity only below the threshold marking a change of ‘state’. Our study also draws attention to the *failure* to emerge; given that assemblage-scholarship almost exclusively focuses on emergence and becoming, taking this research agenda forward is another recommendation we make.

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